

Birth of a Psychedelic Culture

Conversations About Leary, the Harvard Experiments, Millbrook and the Sixties

RAM DASS & RALPH METZNER

With GARY BRAVO & Commentaries by Other Contributors

Foreword by JOHN PERRY BARLOW

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Acid Christ

Ken Kesey, LSD, and the Politics of Ecstasy

MARK CHRISTENSEN

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There is an old joke that those who *really* lived through the 1960s do not, or should not, remember them, which of course implies that they would have been so engrossed in the fog of drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll counterculture that no reliable memories would have survived. Unfortunately, this might hold true for the many whose experiences were so traumatic or dissociative that they actually cannot remember them, or willfully repress them, in order to maintain what sanity they have regained since. As author Mark Christensen opines in *Acid Christ*:

If you count the rock stars dead from drugs, it probably numbers less than a platoon, but if you count the fans who went out the same way, it makes the beaches of Iwo Jima seem unbloodied by comparison.

If we include the human psychic wreckage who still wander the earth, the collateral damage gets exponentially higher.

This is not to say that the effects of LSD, principally, and its accompanying sister drugs (cannabis, psilocybin, mescaline, MDMA, THC, STP, DMT, methamphetamine, and dozens of others) did not offer spiritual insight, psychological clarity, and often a damn good time to many of the Flower Child generation. Indeed, what most recommends the two books under review are their respective attempts to honestly explore, and sometimes explode, the many dichotomous myths surrounding the psychedelic culture. Even so, they are substantially different books that naturally draw quite different conclusions—and each author and/or interviewee manages to remember in remarkable detail the profound confluence of energies that kick-started the great American paradigm shift that was “The Sixties” and beyond.

Birth of a Psychedelic Culture is a record of what surviving members (sans Dr. Leary) of the original Harvard Psilocybin Project have recalled during recent interviews conducted by Gary Bravo, a psychedelics researcher and chief psychiatrist of Sonoma County Medical Health in Santa Rosa, California. The main interviewees are, of course, Richard Alpert (aka Ram Dass) and Ralph Metzner, both founding members of the project, begun in 1960. They also include several other minor characters who are given sidebars to describe their own involvement with the Psilocybin Project and, subsequently, the communal LSD experimentation that took place following the expulsion of Leary and Alpert from Harvard in 1963.

The “Eastern Orthodox Church of LSD,” as John Perry Barlow (who wrote the foreword for this volume) calls the Leary-Alpert-Metzner-dominated community at Millbrook, New York, was very much a research-oriented group whose scholarly backgrounds almost demanded accountability and intellectual deliberation—papers were written; interviews with drugged “subjects” were documented; theories, philosophies, and theologies sprouted like the vines around the unkempt buildings at Millbrook. An official name for the ever-changing commune was needed, so it became the Castalia Foundation. The now familiar principles of “set and setting” were formulated from the LSD experiences at both Millbrook and its adjunct facility in Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Book projects emerged as well, including Leary’s *High Priest* (1968) and Leary, Metzner, and Alpert’s *Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1964).

Also, as part of the leading players’ hope to expose as many artists and writers as possible to both psilocybin and LSD, various luminaries visited Millbrook: Aldous Huxley, William Burroughs, Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus, Maynard Ferguson, Allen Ginsberg, Arthur Koestler, some members of The Grateful Dead, and Alan Watts, among others. When Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters visited from the West Coast contingent of acid-dom, however, they were not well received by this august group. As Metzner recalls Alpert’s reaction at the time, “You said, ‘I feel like we’re a pastoral Indian village invaded by a whooping cowboy band of Wild West saloon carousers.’” Metzner also characterizes the West Coast scene’s whole approach to psychedelics as

hippie “acid freaks,” Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters: not growth, not spiritual experience, not insight or learning, just freak out, go as far as possible to the outermost edge of the hitherto experienced and beyond, blow the mind and yet stay cool and in control, keep up the game.

By contrast, the Millbrook players tried to keep up a more scientific front, quieter, more efficacious and compassionate, in their estimation, because they were, for the most part, still focused on their roles as psychologists and “neuro-nerd” philosophers.

A “guru culture” began to develop among some of the participants, wherein Alpert, for example, considered Leary one of his most important gurus, went on to become a Vedanta Hindu guru himself after spending several years in Indian ashrams, and then published *The Only Dance There Is, Be Here Now*, and several other books under the name Ram Dass. Leary, on the other hand, “hated the concept of guru,” though one can see from his enduring charismatic relationship with his target audience (the youth culture), and with the media, that Leary very much played the guru, except perhaps that he preferred, through his Irish Catholic eyes, to be thought of as a “high priest.”

Leary also played the Catholic card with Alpert’s latent homosexuality, insisting that he suppress it for the good of the project and also for his own personal comfort;

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according to Alpert, Leary once told his children that “Uncle Richard [Alpert] is evil” and made Alpert feel that his “gayness [was] a sickness.” Leary also famously declared in *Playboy* (September 1966) that LSD was “a cure for homosexuality.” Despite all his revolutionary remarks about leaving behind the puritanical culture of our forebears, Leary still seems to have been very much guided by his own puritanical mores and intent on advancing his own standing in the emerging psychedelic culture at any cost.

Leary’s psychedelic philosophy, his “Big News,” seems cobbled together from elements of Blakean visionary experience and American transcendentalism (e.g., Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric”), DNA theory, a host of paranormal/supernatural/metaphysical ideas regarding the nature of reality, Tibetan Buddhist “ego death,” Hugh Hefner’s brand of *Playboy* libertinism, good old Christian millenarianism, and his own overarching sense of having stumbled upon the alchemical Philosopher’s Stone in the form of a microscopic fungal spore (ergot) and Albert Hoffman’s formulation LSD-25—whose bright power he now ostensibly controlled.

By 1966 the group’s “psychedelic celebrations and pageants in Millbrook, with hundreds of people, evolved into theatrical presentations in New York, attracting several thousands.” In Greenwich Village on November 15, the Village Theater presented *Dr. Timothy Leary: Reincarnation of Jesus Christ*. According to Metzner, Leary played the

psychological “guide” to a Jesus portrayed as “wandering around New York on a bad guilt trip,” wherein Leary “kidded him out of his martyrdom.” Abbie Hoffman’s wife, Anita, recalls differently that Leary played Christ onstage: “What hubris to play the Divine,” she wrote of her reaction. “Shameless! Cult leader! Self-appointed guru!” (*Timothy Leary: Outside Looking In*). The show apparently lasted through only one performance (though the evidence is unclear), and Metzner thought the whole thing “blasphemous.”

Metzner concludes that Leary’s

attitude toward religion as a form of social organization was that we should use it, for our own purposes. That’s why he incorporated The League for Spiritual Discovery [in 1966].

Leary also wrote a booklet titled *Start Your Own Religion* because, Metzner continues,

if we have to have a religious organization to get state protection [for the possession and use of psychedelics], then start your own religion.

This position eerily echoes that of L. Ron Hubbard prior to his founding of the Church of Scientology: “The things which have been happening ... have removed Scientology entirely from any classification as a psychotherapy. ... We can only exist in the field of religion” (Hubbard, “The Hope of Man,” 1955; quoted verbatim as above in Jon Atack’s *A Piece of Blue Sky*). Atack further explores this angle by quoting Lloyd Arthur Eshbach’s autobiography, *Over My Shoulder*: “[Hubbard] said he would like to start a religion, because that was where the money was.”

By 1965, Leary’s trajectory had already begun falling into chaos and legal trouble; with a bust for marijuana possession hanging over him and another one on the way in 1968, his legal entanglements eventually landed him a 20-year sentence in a low-security California prison for possession of less than a half ounce of marijuana in 1970. Thanks to the California-based Brotherhood of Eternal Love (who manufactured and sold LSD to the tune of \$20 million a year), he was smuggled out of prison by the Weather Underground and taken to Algeria, where he holed up with Black Panther founder Eldridge Cleaver under dire conditions. Leary and his wife, Rosemary, fled to Switzerland and then, after a divorce from Rosemary, he fled with a new wife to Afghanistan in 1973. Before deplaning there, he was arrested by U.S. federal agents under orders from President Nixon’s attorney general, John Mitchell, and returned to California.

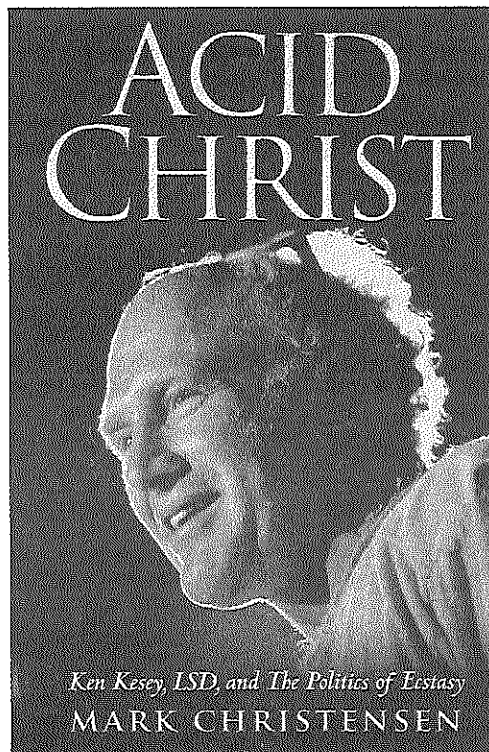
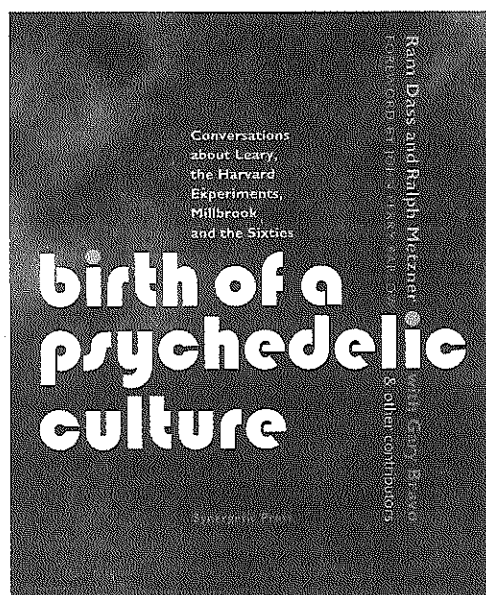
“He faced 25 years in prison (in the course of his trial he compared himself to Jesus and Socrates), and in 1973 was sent first to Folsom—where his neighbor was Charles Manson—and then Vacaville. There, realizing he would be an old man by the time he was released, he decided to turn state’s evidence [against the Weathermen]. ... Characteristically, he compared himself to ‘Christ ... harassed by Pilate and Herod’” (from Luc Sante’s review of *Timothy Leary: A Biography* by Robert Greenfield, *The New York Times Book Review*, June 25, 2006).

Apropos of its title, *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture* does not cover its demise, except to say that both Alpert and Metzner began to grow fearful of the widespread, now illegal use of LSD across the country. As Alpert concludes:

I think it was the spread of the drug into the general public, out of the control of the medical-psychiatric establishment, which freaked them out. Our group was not responsible for that. ... If you’re going to blame anyone for the spread to the masses, it would be more the Kesey group and the electric Kool-Aid acid tests.

By way of contrast, media mastermind Marshall McLuhan responded to Leary’s need for advice on manipulating the media by saying, in Alpert’s words, “that if you’re going to be an advocate for this new approach, you have to be unrelentingly positive and smiling whenever you talk with the media.” It was McLuhan who inspired Leary to create the snappy slogan “Turn on, tune in, drop out.” It would seem Leary was hardly blameless for the media-driven spread of LSD culture to “the masses.”

So someone had to document the pathology leading up to the imminent disintegration of the psychedelic culture, and that daunting task has recently been handed to Mark Christensen, author of *Acid Christ*, which picks up where Bravo and company leave off. In what the author and publisher call a “flagship” endeavor, Christensen’s book is a mash-up of genres—biography, authorial autobiography, and sociological monograph—which they call a “participatory biography.” This approach works especially well in bringing to teeming life the complex cultural goings-on that spawned, and were spawned by, what could be called the West Coast Unorthodox Church of LSD, initiated in large part by Ken Kesey and friends. (Continued on page 6)



Acid Christ (Continued from page 5)

Christensen takes a rather scattershot approach in delineating Kesey's lifetime trajectory (we'll kindly call it a "non-linear approach"), which he freely intersperses with events from his own life as one of the 20 million baby-boomer "suburban urchins" who found themselves smack-dab in the middle of the acid revolution. For the sake of authenticity, however, Christensen establishes a prima facie personal link to Kesey (for one thing, he beat Kesey in a barroom arm-wrestling challenge), and takes his role as a biographer seriously enough to have done exhaustive research via printed material, folkloric anecdotes, and personal interviews with Kesey's many friends, associates, and enemies. The turbulent subculture that surrounded them all is evoked by Christensen through a delightful mix of surrealism, gonzo journalism, high (and low) comedy, and a self-deprecating sense of hapless wonder and confusion. His observations about other happenings outside his purview provide a keen awareness of the wide array of cults, gurus, warlocks and witches, brotherhoods, religions, "churches," avatars, demigods, merchandisers, musical genres and bands, drugs, communes, hoaxes, sexual practices, and the myriad other phenomena that pervaded the gestalt of hippiedom.

Throughout, however, and despite some minor lapses into solipsism, Christensen's main impetus is to lead the reader into Ken Kesey's life as he and others saw it at the time. He finds his main theme, that of Kesey as a Christ-like figure, by parsing both Kesey's greatest novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* ("his self-described 'simple Christian parable'"), and Kesey's own particular religious background, finding therein significant Christ-like imagery, speech, and, most importantly, Kesey's personal messianic impetus. In *Cuckoo's Nest*, for example, the antihero Randall McMurphy, at the moment before one of his electroshock treatments, is told by the unforgettable villain Nurse Ratched, "You are strapped to a table, shaped, ironically, like a cross, with a crown of electric sparks in place of thorns." Kesey's life was also a cauldron of concepts derived from his evangelical Christian upbringing; Christensen cites the following: "Asked if not a writer, what path would he have pursued, evangelical Kesey replied, 'I would have been a preacher.'"

The ironic history of the CIA's early involvement with LSD-25 experimentation is well documented, and indeed Kesey got his first trips for free in 1960 as a paid volunteer subject in a CIA-sponsored experiment at the Menlo Park Veteran's Hospital psych ward. Sitting alone in a locked room for hours at a time, Kesey was dosed with LSD-25, and perhaps some mescaline and psilocybin. Shortly afterward he became an orderly at the hospital, and it was there, out among the population of the psych ward, that Kesey reported that he "saw it all." It was also here that he wrote *Cuckoo's Nest*, which went on to sell 7 million copies in 66 editions, and still counting. It was hailed by both critics and the reading public, made into a play starring Kirk Douglas, followed by a film produced by Michael Douglas in 1975 (after several false starts) that took all five of the major Oscars: best film, best director (Milos Forman), best actor (Jack Nicholson), best screenplay (not Kesey), and best actress (Louise Fletcher). Kesey claimed that he made less than \$30,000 for the rights and a rejected screenplay. By the time he'd finished writing *Sometimes a Great Notion*, another best-seller and successful film production, he declared publicly that he was no longer a writer. He chose instead to become the major acid messiah of the West Coast.

His subsequent promotion and indiscriminate distribution of LSD and other psychotropic drugs are at the center of the controversy surrounding Kesey; in effect, he was promoting widespread drug-induced psychosis as the path to "crazy wisdom"—an ersatz Tibetan-styled liberation from the constraints of civilization and the ostensible illusions under which humanity labors in suffering. Perhaps—as Christensen points out in a quote from concert promoter Bill Graham (who was in the thick of things when it came to psychedelic events) regarding the "Trips Festival" (the grandest "Acid Test" of them all)—Kesey had begun a crusade that more resembled the Crusades than a purported children's crusade:

I had not seen the acid thing in full force [before that night]. That night, I did. It shocked me. They might as well have been offering hand grenades to people. When LSD exploded inside the body, how did they [Kesey and friends] know how much damage the shrapnel could cause? They had ices spiked with acid, available to all, children as well. There were big tubs on the balcony and downstairs for anyone to consume. ... There has to be a warning. If people don't know, how can you assume their body can take what yours can? How can you know that?

Beat Memories

The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg
SARAH GREENOUGH
National Gallery of Art/DelMonico/
Prestel, \$49.95 cloth,
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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was many things. Notably, and at times notoriously, he was a poet, the author of the zeitgeist-defining *Howl*, a primary document of the Beat Generation. He was a controversialist, sometimes without apparent intent, sometimes with a definite wish to rattle our collective cages. He was a correspondent, archivist, and teacher of note. He was a traveler, diarist, ecstatic.

And, perhaps least well-known of all his pursuits, he was a photographer of distinction.

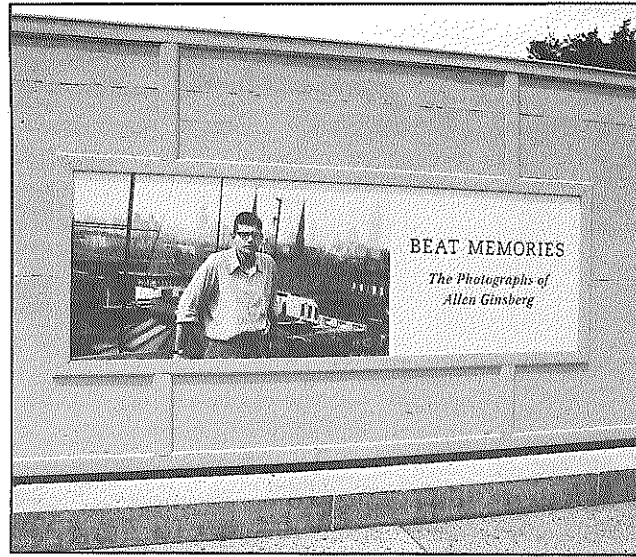
Ginsberg was almost 70 when he received the news that he had incurable cancer, and he set himself to doing what he called "death work," which included putting the last of his archives in order. He had already sold much of his library and collection of manuscripts some years earlier, encountering criticism from odd corners for having done so. His photographs, it's said, were not so well ordered, but fortunately a new home for them came courtesy of a collector named Gary Davis, who, writes curator Sarah Greenough, "acquired a master set of more than 390 Ginsberg photographs from his estate." Davis subsequently donated 75 images to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the basis of the exhibit catalog now published as *Beat Memories*.

The master set included every photograph of which Ginsberg had kept a copy, most of them inscribed with captions in circumstantial detail. One disturbing image of a dissipated Jack Kerouac, for instance, bears the handwritten legend,

Jack Kerouac the last time he visited my apartment 704 East 5th Street, N.Y.C., he looked by then like his late father, red-faced corpulent W.C. Fields shuddering with mortal horror, grimacing on D.M.T. I'd brought back from visiting Timothy Leary at Millbrook Psychedelic Community, Fall 1964.

There's a lot going on in those 47 words, just as there is in the gelatin silver print of a Beat angel fast disintegrating into a right-wing misanthrope and alcoholic.

REVIEWER/PHOTOGRAPHER: Gregory McNamee is the author, most recently, of *Careers in Renewable Energy* from PixyJack Press. Photograph of National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. ©2010.



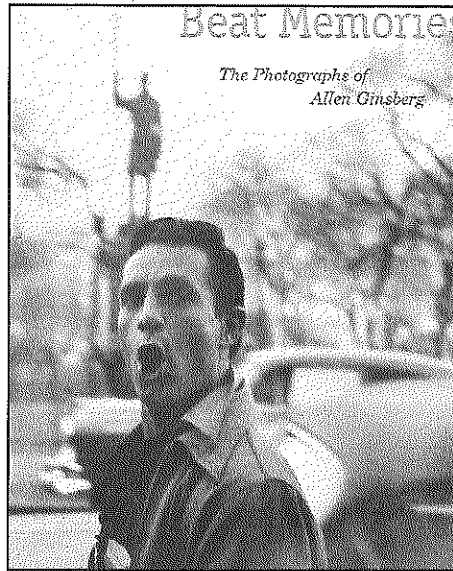
the hands are naked. It gives a more complete picture of the action or the whole attitude of the body. If you just take a picture from the chest up—no hands—you don't quite get the whole gesture."

For her part, another photographer, Berenice Abbott, encouraged him to stand back to give "a little space around the subject," thus affording context to the image.

The advice was well taken, perhaps nowhere better than in a photograph of Beat bad boy William S. Burroughs taken late in his life, when Burroughs was living square in the middle of the heartland railroad earth. Writes Ginsberg, at the time of the photograph, Burroughs was "looking at the sky, empty timeless Lawrence Kansas." Burroughs retorted, on seeing it and pointing to a little sedan far in the background of the image, "But the car dates it."

Some of these pieces are dated, some indeed timeless. All are worth seeing and lingering over. On a trip to Washington, D.C., this summer past, I visited the National Gallery of Art, where some 75 of Ginsberg's images were on display in a special showing. The L-shaped gallery in which the exhibit was mounted was full of museumgoers, many young enough to have been Ginsberg's great-grandchildren. Listening to snatches of their conversations, it was clear to me that they didn't have

much sense of who Ginsberg was—or, for that matter, who the likes of Burroughs and Kerouac were, either. It was also clear, though, that they intended to find out, spurred to interest by the fluent captions and images before them. *Beat Memories* makes for a fine introduction for those newcomers, and it is a pleasure for anyone interested in Allen Ginsberg's life, work, and times.



Indeed, Graham's criticism of Kesey gains some traction as one learns this and much more about his "freak freely" methodology.

The particulars of the antics of Kesey and The Merry Pranksters—their various trips (like that to Millbrook in 1964, above), their infamous "Acid Tests" (usually held in conjunction with The Warlocks aka The Grateful Dead), and the lives of the Pranksters themselves—are already well documented in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*; *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* by Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain; and *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* by Jay Stevens. Although he deftly draws from these sources, what distinguishes Christensen's narrative is his research into arcane sources (e.g., the University of Oregon's Kesey archives and various obscure journals of the day); his personal interviews with Kesey associates and Kesey himself, former Pranksters, and insiders such as poet Walt Curtis, *The Realist* editor and writer Paul Krassner, and Christensen's cousin Marty Christensen, an "Auxiliary Prankster" and poet; and his interspersed subjective/reactive experiences of living inside the druggie counterculture that Kesey in large part created.

As to the latter, Christensen is alternately on point or hyperbolically afloat, hilariously amusing, and then again a bit fatuous and long-winded (I sometimes found myself thinking "Wow, too much information, dude!"), and either going at it with straight-ahead narrative or appearing lost in a wilderness of confusion and self-doubt. Which is to say, he quite accurately represents a kind of Everyman's experience as a "sheep" trying to psychically locate and understand his self-anointed "shepherds" (a nice distinction he makes at the book's outset between the milieu of average hippies-to-be ["The Sheep"] and that of the ecumenical would-be Christ of the psychedelic culture).

For those looking to find meaning in, and perhaps some sense of closure with, the turbulent epoch that will always be The-capitalized-Sixties, these two recapitulations, taken together, provide mindful insights aplenty, much literary nourishment and a redemptive reminder that we remain mere mortals in spite of it all. "The dream," as John Lennon said, "is over," but our collective remembrance of it is essential. These firsthand portraits of the major players in the psychedelic passion play that was our popular culture ring with certain truths we will always be in need of when asked by our younger brothers and sisters, "What was it like, living in The Sixties?"